



Nick Watts writes:

## MOD and SMEs

On 28th January, the MOD announced the launch of a bespoke Â£20 million fund to offer accelerated contracts to small, innovative British startups who have had limited or no business contact with the Ministry of Defence. The fund is part of the government's commitment to make Britain the best place to start and grow a defence business.

As set out in the Defence Industrial Strategy, the government sees defence as an engine for growth, "and small businesses are the backbone of UK defence, bringing the innovation, agility and fresh thinking that UK Armed Forces need to transform and stay ahead of increasing and evolving threats."

Contracts awarded through the new fund will be driven by the requirements of the UK Armed Forces, led by UK Defence Innovation (UKDI). UKDI will lead the search for the best UK technology to exploit which is broken into sets of technology and capability themes, including AI, Machine Learning & data science; robotics & autonomy and Enhanced Precision Weapons

The fund comes alongside the Â£400 million ring-fenced for novel technology and the commitment to spend an additional Â£2.5 billion with SMEs through to May 2028 - taking MOD's total SME spend to Â£7.5 billion - is in addition to a new 'Dragon's Den' style event for Defence tech companies.

As the Greek philosopher said "the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so we will have to

wait and see what contracts emerge from this. But to encourage the MOD that there is a wide range of innovation in the sector, Commentary is happy to spotlight three SMEs worthy of their consideration.....

## Bridgeworks

David Trossell is the CEO and CTO of Bridgeworks, a UK company based in Lymington, with a staff of 18. Their offer is to securely move large amounts of data over long distances, across a Wide Area Network (WAN). The problem associated with this process can be 'latency' – time lag in laymen's language. Another problem can be the distortion of data in transit. Bridgeworks have developed a solution that addresses this problem.

This technology is being used now in the commercial sector in the USA where long distances are a part of doing business. One customer used their system to transmit data from Rhode Island on the east coast to a location in Arizona in the west of the country. In the USA Bridgeworks have been doing work with the NSA, as well as the Department of Justice (DoJ). The utility of this capability is such that Bridgeworks are part of the Five Eyes suppliers group. With the advent of Artificial Intelligence in so many defence applications now, it would make sense for the MOD to engage with the company and explore how their solutions can be applied across the whole of the defence enterprise.

## Spectrum Control

For more than 70 years Spectrum Control has been developing reliable, high-performance technologies for powering and conditioning electronic equipment. Andy Crawford, Business Development and Sales Manager explained that their work continues to push out the limits of the possible today, innovating in material science, design engineering, and manufacturing technologies.

Spectrum Control has two UK locations, Milton Keynes and Great Yarmouth. Since world war two the Great Yarmouth site has seen the evolution of technology from resistors and diodes to the modern day where their work concentrates on harnessing evolving technology to enable legacy equipment to perform the same task with more technical capability, particularly in harsh environments.

One of its offerings, Opto X enables analogue data to be digitised and sent via more modern fibre networks. One example of this in current use is on the Eurofighter which originated with 1980s technology. Spectrum Control's equipment FOFE Fibre Optic Front End, is used to reduce latency. As well as the F 35, Spectrum Control equipment is present on systems which operate in all domains, including space.

A challenge that Spectrum Control has to deal with is the relationship with MOD. As an SME the company is part of the Eurofighter consortium, where its main relationship is with Leonardo in Italy. It also has a relationship with MBDA. Currently the MOD issues framework contracts to prime contractors and SMEs need to be selected for these by the primes.

The result can mean that SMEs with particularly specialised capability are not able to have any input into the specification, and this may mean that the result is a sub-optimal solution. If SMEs had earlier engagement with the MOD, they could shape their offering to match the specification and save money by future proofing the specification and avoiding the need to re-scope the specification.

## BMNT

Supporting a variety of new entrants and tech startups into the defence arena in the UK, the small team at BMNT Ltd captures ethos of rapid innovation and development that the MOD is seeking to achieve. Led by Alison Hawks and recently joined by former ADS staffer Hugo Rosemont, their vision is to use their experience across Government, industry and academia to enable companies that have a new technology, or capability, to get through the red tape that faces a new entrant into the defence market.

Earlier this month, BMNT Ltd announced the launch of - in their own words - a new, end to end offer of bespoke advisory services for government customers, technology start-ups, investors, and defence companies of all sizes wanting to understand and grow across the UK and wider allied defence, national security, and resilience markets. Building on their track record as a pioneer in the U.S. and the UK in enabling defence tech start-ups to work with government to develop and acquire new, mission-critical capabilities faster - including through initiatives such as the London Tech Bridge and through engagement in strategic agreements like AUKUS - BMNT says this broader go-to-market solution fully integrates government affairs advisory work

into BMNT's suite of services.

And it's not only startups and UK MOD that BMNT is supporting as interest grows in this area. Last week, for example, the High Commission of Canada in the UK announced it was working with BMNT on the delivery of content for the cohort of companies within its first UK-based accelerator programme for Maritime Defence and Security Applications of Ocean Technologies.

Over to you PM

Hopefully the Prime minister will have got the message from the recent Munich Security Conference that Europe still has a lot to do, to achieve a sufficient level of conventional capability to deter further aggression by Putin.

As Commentary goes to press (!), there is reporting this morning by the BBC, that the PM is considering bringing forward the resources needed to increase defence spending in this parliament (2029 at the latest). This is something that Commentary, and others, have been calling for. The UK risks looking like a laggard as many of our European allies are already doing so. If this turns out to be the case, it suggests that the PM has won the battle with the Treasury to do so. In which case the MOD can increase the tempo of its engagement with some of the SMEs spot lit here. Commentary will continue to monitor developments.

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